

Performance Measurement ...Matters

http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/gov/dmb/perf_measure.htm

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Measuring Customer Satisfaction

By Sara Daleski, Department of Systems Management
for Human Services

As part of ongoing strategic planning processes and efforts to measure service quality, agencies continue to seek ways to better understand what customers want, as well as determine their satisfaction level with various County services. Customers are the reason we do what we do. They are the foundation of an agency's performance reputation, and are subsequently critical to its success and survival.

Government agencies face special challenges in dealing with customers. For the most part, our customers have no other option than to use our services. The nature of some of our work, e.g., regulatory and enforcement functions, may create competing customer interests, or make identifying customers difficult. We may also have problems defining what we do as a tangible, measurable (and thus improvable) outcome, rather than a process. Notwithstanding these difficulties, our customers can help us improve our products and processes.

Agencies can partner with customers to find new ways of achieving outcomes and meeting expectations. Customers can help identify innovative ways to improve our products and/or services and possibly make outcomes easier to achieve. They inform agencies about the attributes that determine customer satisfaction. Customer-driven organizations must work continuously to identify customers, ask what customers want, set standards so customers know what to expect, and equally important, *measure and publish their results*.

It can sometimes be challenging to incorporate customers into our business processes. First, consider – do we even ask our customers what they want? Do we ask what they would change about our products and/or services, or the results customers hope to achieve by using them? Are we willing to expose process issues, plans and results to scrutiny? If we are listening to our customers, do we respond with feedback? By integrating

your customers into this feedback loop, your challenges will become open windows for new opportunities to attain greater customer satisfaction.

Ideally, customer research should be linked to an organization's strategic planning process so that feedback and ideas can be used for priority-setting and decision-making. Many agencies went through this process a few years ago when developing their strategic plans by determining the criteria that customers (and stakeholders, if you are collecting data from them as well) use to judge the organization's performance. If there was no existing baseline data on customer expectations, a number of agencies set out to collect this information. Some used surveys; others relied on focus groups or other techniques.

Collecting Customer Satisfaction Data

Some organizations conduct mail, telephone or in-person surveys to evaluate programs. The problem is that we are sometimes not very good at conducting surveys. Surveys can be expensive, difficult to do well, and must be carefully planned in order to collect data that are useful for decisions regarding processes, products and services.

Customer surveys can take two different approaches. One is to get feedback on the process, e.g., the attributes and features of our services/products (promptness, courteous staff, and understanding of customer problems). The other approach is to ask questions about customers' preferences regarding outcomes (results achieved by receiving the service or product). This can help us determine whether we are doing the right things. It is important to distinguish between the two different approaches, which, it should be noted, can be used together in one survey. The surveying agency should be clear in its intent regarding the type of information it

wants to collect, as well as *how* it will use that information. Data regarding timeliness, accuracy and courteousness can help drive internal process improvements, while determining actual customer preferences guides strategic decisions.

There are also practical difficulties in conducting surveys. Sometimes we are just too busy to get around to talking to

Opportunity is missed by most
people because it is dressed
in overalls
and looks
like work.

- Thomas
Edison



(Continued from Page One)

customers, or we lack the organizational capacity to collect and analyze customer feedback. Some surveys have low response rates from over-surveyed citizens and employees. Other methodological problems include the difficulties of including a representative sample of the agency's customers, statistical reliability and validity issues with question wording. However, these are all challenges that can all be overcome with careful planning and a clear intent upfront regarding the purpose and use of the survey data. Resources to help you address these issues are included at the end of this article.

Getting Useful Feedback

Performance measures quantify the output, efficiency, service quality and outcome of our processes, products and services. This information should be specific so that we can evaluate the relative effectiveness of alternative resource allocations, and organizational designs. Customers base their opinions of agencies on both the outcome of service and the process of receiving the service.

The purpose of any customer-inquiry method should be to drive action and identify key success factors: what must the agency do to be successful? What is it about an agency's philosophy, core values, distinctive competencies, etc., that help it manage change and survive? Assess your organization's performance from the customer's point of view. Focus on what customers want, rather than what you think they need or want. Are there any overlaps? Gaps? Conflicts or contradictions in criteria? A good way to answer such questions and obtain good qualitative feedback is to conduct focus groups with relevant groups of customers.

An excellent resource for conducting productive focus group is Ken Miller's process improvement handbook: *The Change Agent's Guide to Radical Improvement*.¹ Agencies conducting customer satisfaction and process improvement programs may find this handbook helpful. Miller argues that, "Organizations can learn more from their customers in a 90-minute focus group or a 15-minute interview than they will ever find out in a decade of surveys." He recommends including all important end-users in focus groups and structuring groups so that people are more likely to be honest and open. Qualitative information from focus groups becomes the basis for future customer satisfaction questionnaire designs or process redesigns. Focus groups with customers, stakeholders and service providers may also be useful for helping you understand how these individuals influence your organization. They can also help identify what the organization needs from stakeholders (funding, positions, support), as well as the relative importance of stakeholders.

Other Alternatives to Customer Satisfaction Surveys

A number of alternatives to surveys exist for collecting customer service information. Surveys can provide more in-depth and detailed information when done correctly, but even non-scientific methods (comment cards or suggestion boxes, website feedback tools, telephone hot lines, etc.) can be used to identify performance trends and drive improvements.

Fairfax County's Manual for Performance Measurement encourages agencies to "be creative and consider other cost-effective means" of collecting customer feedback. Options for collecting data from customers include utilizing response cards, website or internet feedback tools, interactive kiosks, and point-of-service questionnaires. Some agencies use web-based survey services that create, send and tabulate the results of emailed surveys. "Secret shoppers" can also assess front-line services and report back on what they observe. Each research technique has its strengths and weaknesses, reaches a different population, and serves a different purpose. Use what best fits your agency's requirements, and these tools and tips will help you better measure customer satisfaction and improve your outcomes.

For additional information, see the following resources:

A Manual for Performance Measurement: Fairfax County Measures Up

http://infoweb/DMB/performance_measurement/basic_manual.pdf

Survey Research Resources

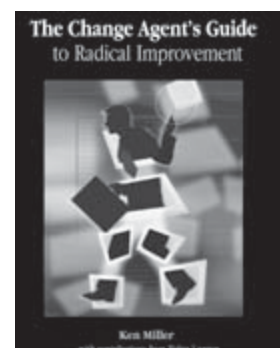
A number of resources exist to help you with the customer satisfaction and survey process. These include:

http://infoweb/DMB/performance_measurement/survey_manual.pdf

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/comm/demograph/pdf/pitfalls.pdf>

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/comm/demograph/pdf/questionnairedesign.pdf>

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/comm/demograph/pdf/samplingprocedures.pdf>



¹ Ken Miller, *The Change Agent's Guide to Radical Improvement* (Milwaukee, WI: Quality Press, 2002)

PM Events Through August 2005

The PM Team will be offering the four-class series on June 15-16, 2005 (see schedule below). The Basic PM Class provides an introduction to the PM system that Fairfax County uses, particularly its terminology and methodology. It covers how to develop objectives as well as the corresponding Family of Measures. The Data Collection and Surveying classes are for those whose job responsibilities require them to use these tools to ensure the integrity and completeness of performance data collected and/or to survey for customer satisfaction. The Managing for Results class is intended for those who are responsible for using the PM system to manage. Its focus is identifying gaps in performance as well as how to close those gaps and enhance performance. A prerequisite for the Managing for Results Class is to have attended the Basic PM Class. All of these classes are half-day and can be registered for by contacting Barbara Emerson of the PM Team at 324-3009 (e-mail BEMERS) by **May 20, 2005**. Registration is on a first-come, first-serve basis. In addition, please note that the August 9, 2005 Brownbag will be a brief one-hour refresher for those who had the basic training previously, but would benefit from a review, particularly during budget preparation when this information plays a critical role in resource requests.

EVENT	DATE/TIME	LOCATION
Basic PM Training	June 15, 2005 8:30-11:30 a.m.	CR 4-5 Government Center (GC)
Data Collection	June 15, 2005 1:00-3:30 p.m.	CR 4-5 GC
Surveying for Customer Satisfaction	June 16, 2005 8:30-11:30 a.m.	CR 4-5 GC
Managing for Results	June 16, 2005 12:30-3:30 p.m.	CR 4-5 GC
Brownbag Lunch - PM Refresher	August 9, 2005 Noon – 1 p.m.	Room 120C GC

WANTED – New PM Team Members

Each spring, the Performance Measurement Team solicits interest for new members. The typical term for members is approximately one year, with the option to extend participation. Members have commented that it often takes a year to learn the system in order to become fully contributing participants. For this reason, many choose to stay on for a second year or more. Since most of the current team has elected to stay on for another year, there are just a few openings for new members. The following are the requirements and benefits of participating on the PM Team.

Qualifications:

- Team player
- Commitment to keeping Fairfax County a high performance organization
- Recommended for participation by the agency director

Time Commitment:

- Preparation for and attendance at regular meetings (approximately 2 hours/month)
- Attendance at PM brownbag lunches and training
- Additional time as needed to perform the functions of the team

Term of Service:

- One year (with ability to extend pending the mutual agreement of the team and the agency director)

Benefits:

- Association with other professionals committed to measuring and improving performance
- Enhanced understanding of the County's PM methodology
- Opportunity to influence the future direction of the effort

If this sounds like something that you would be interested in, please send a brief synopsis of your skills and how your participation will benefit you, your agency and the County. Please include this information in a memo from your agency director indicating his/her approval. Forward this to Barbara Emerson, Department of Management and Budget by **May 6, 2005**. Applicants will be notified shortly thereafter and an orientation will be provided.

Hard work spotlights the character of people: some turn up their sleeves, some turn up their noses, and some don't turn up at all.

- Sam Ewing



Performance Measurement Matters is published by the PM Team. Editors: Barbara Emerson and Bill Yake; Technical Support: Lynda Pham, Department of Management and Budget.